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## Civic Education in K-12 School Enhanced Through a Christian Faith Lens Perspective

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## Civic Education in K-12 School Enhanced Through a Christian Faith Lens Perspective

### Abstract

Nationwide concerns about the declining political health of the United States has prompted questions on how to instruct and prepare youth to engage in civic life, particularly in K-12 public schools. This priority is also known as civic education, a broad curricular approach aimed at facilitating students' development of key civic knowledge, skills, and behaviors. Fortunately, the Christian worldview can enhance the individuals' ability to effectively teach students about the importance of civics due to overlaps in community values. This literature review draws on theoretical and empirical work to provide an integrative framework that fuses Christian ethos with civic education so that policymakers and practitioners can embrace the effectiveness of this blended approach to better preparing youth to become active and informed citizens.

### Keywords

civic education, social studies, citizenship

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### Introduction

The mass shooting resulting in the death of 17 students and staff at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida on February 14th, 2018 marks one of the worst days in U.S. history (Woodall, 2018). But this tragedy did not stop student advocates – Cameron Kasky and Sarah Chadwick – from launching a nationwide movement campaigning for gun control laws. These students organized bus tours that crisscrossed the country mobilizing thousands of young people to vote on this issue. In fact, these movement founders held public meetings and formed alliances with other local youth gun-control activists. Although an underreported aspect of the news, one of these movement founders, a Parkland student, was also a devout Christian and mobilized 3,000 Christians to hold a pre-march rally next to the Supreme Court as part of the *#ThoughtsPrayersAction* movement (London & Warren, 2018). Overall, millions of people were part of the *#neveragain* movement, and there were thousands who marched to Washington. In the end, this campaign was instrumental to significant national reforms: 67 gun-safety bills were signed into law in 26 states and Washington, D.C (Gifford Law Center, 2018).

The inspiring feats described above demonstrate the power of youth civic engagement and its far-reaching effects on mobilizing young people to influence national policy. Voting behaviors also show promising signs in civic engagement among young people. In the U.S., 50% of eligible young people (aged 18–29 years old) voted in the 2020

national elections, reflecting a 11% increase from 2016 (39%), according to a report by a non-partisan consortium, the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE, 2021). The report has specifically attributed this improvement to a variety of factors, including modified voting and registration laws that eased restrictions and increased importance of vote-by-mail options. Despite these promising signs, youth voting turnout in the national election, which represents a key barometer about the political health of this country, is still relatively low compared to other age groups (35-64 years old, 69%; 65+ years old, 74%), and youth voting turnout has dropped from 50.9% in 1964 to 38.0% in 2012 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). Other key aspects demonstrate the weakening and declining political health of this country. For example, trust in the government is at a historic low, as national data indicates that fewer than 20% of Americans (17%) were strongly confident in government compared to the previous five years (20-24%, Pew Research Center, 2019). Compared to the youth vote, Protestant Christians performed better (52%), and these numbers have been fairly consistent over the last five years (53% in 2012; 54% in 2008; Pew Research Center, 2016). In sum, these findings indicate that the country faces strong challenges in the general population's declining participation in civic and political life, with this trend especially salient among young people.

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Widespread anxiety about the political environment is attributed to many different factors, but one notable explanation is the rise of political polarization that has reached alarming proportions. Americans are highly divided on controversial issues, such as the economy, gun control, and immigration, and divisions about such issues and have been attributed to increasing alignment with partisan identities (Mason, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2017). Fostering this political environment of “echo chambers,” many political scholars are concerned about the patterns of information sharing that reinforce preexisting political beliefs by limiting exposure to opposing political views – a phenomenon that is further amplified by the ubiquitous rise of social media (Bail et al., 2018). In turn, these partisan divides have far-reaching consequences, particularly in impeding compromise in the design and implementation of social policies (Achen & Barel, 2016).

Among young people (18-29 yrs.), not only is the trend in declining political attitudes and activities of significant concern, but also troubling is the low rate of civic engagement, such as volunteering and community involvement (Raposa et al., 2017). More specifically, youth are less likely to demonstrate certain civic behaviors, such as participating in community organizations (Tschirhart & Gazley, 2014), attending community meetings, or contacting public officials (Levine & Liu, 2015). This trend in low civic engagement is noteworthy, given that these behaviors are strongly linked with political participation in adulthood, such as increased sense of civic obligation (Riedel, 2002) and greater likelihood to vote (Duke et al., 2009). In fact, the relation between community involvement and adult political participation is particularly salient among youth from ethnic minority backgrounds (Flanagan et al., 2007). In sum, these studies support the notion that fulfilling one’s civic duty to vote is connected to a broader field of civic engagement that can be exercised at the local (e.g. volunteering and helping a neighbor) and national levels (e.g. voting, donating money to political party/candidate and protesting, Adler & Googin, 2005). These findings inspire us to ask: How do young people learn to become civically engaged?

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American public schools are called to help young people to become civically engaged, and this is espoused in the Common Core State Standards’ focus on the 3 C’s: College, Career, and Citizenship. The third “C” – Citizenship – is more commonly understood to focus on civic education. In response to this goal, a large body of research has documented various ways, including best practices, that schools can effectively address civic education and thus create pathways for students to become more civically engaged (Lin, 2015; Niemi & Junn, 2005). Understanding that there is, perhaps, a lack of awareness about the importance of civic education in schools, scholars and policymakers have made a strong national push to incorporate more civics education in the classroom. A coalition of esteemed researchers and policymakers created the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) in order to develop and disseminate information about youth civic engagement, including analyzing trends in civic behaviors and providing effective teaching practices on civic education.

However, so far, the discussion about promoting civic education has largely focused on a secular perspective of integrating civic education in the classroom, because attention is largely focused on the public school context. However, little is known about the role of civic education in Christian

schools, let alone Christian educators working in the public schools. Along with these questions that will be tackled in this article, we will first address the larger issue of understanding *What is the Christian role in one's own individual obligations to his/her civic and political community?* Following this discussion, we can then address the next topic concerning how a personal understanding of civic education from a Christian perspective can be extended to promote involvement in developing civic life among young people.

## Christians Called to Engage in Civic Life

Controversies surrounding the extent that Christians should engage in civic life are emblematic of a more fundamental question on the extent that they should be involved in the world. Various Christian scholars argue that Christians should set themselves apart from the world as an alternate community (Hays, 1996). These scholars take a separatist stance, based on the strong view that God's people, the Israelites, were called to be separated from their unholy neighbors (e.g., Moabites, Amorites, Hittites) because of their idolatrous ways in worshipping false gods; in turn, this call inspired Moses to make his famous proclamation to his people, "we shall be separated from all the people that are upon the face of the earth" (Exodus 33:16). The concern is that Christians are called to "be holy in all matter" (1 Peter 1:15) and to be separated from darkness (1 John 1:5) or having any connection with immoral and ungodly people.

Contrary to this view, Skillen (2004) along with other Christian scholars, argued that Christ's lordship encompasses *all* of creation and humanity, which also includes non-believers and those of different religious beliefs (Romans 3:29). From this perspective, Christians are called to actively restore the world based on Christ's redemptive teachings that emphasize being involved (Acts 9:15; Luke 24:27), rather than separated from the world. For instance, Christ makes the proclamation for his followers to "go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). To address the separationists' stance on preserving holiness, Skillen (2004) pointed to Jesus's position that His followers can be

reassured that because they have already been called "out of darkness," they "can proclaim the excellencies of Him" (1 Peter 2:9). While Christians should actively protect themselves from sin (Proverbs 4:23), strong Biblical evidence points to how Christians were created to actively engage in public life by "being a light in the world" (Matthew 5:14-16) to positively impact society. In sum, this view supports the belief that Christians are called to engage in both aspects: avoiding sin and engaging with the world. Put another way, Christians can strive to be in the world, but not *of* the world.

Drawing from a combination of theoretical and empirical work that has attempted to develop critical links between civic education and Christian spirituality (Wallis, 2008; Youniss, McLellan & Yates, 1997), Dr. Tara Stoppa (2015), Psychology Professor at Eastern University, provided an integrative framework that specifically focuses on how cultivation and development in the area of civic engagement can be enhanced through a Christian perspective. It is important to note that discussion of this integrative framework (Stoppa, 2015) is not intended to encourage Christian teachers to explicitly promote Biblical values and principles within the area of civic education to public school students, given strict rules reflecting separation of church and state. Rather, she contends that Christian educators can embody a Christian faith perspective on teaching civic education in order to help students navigate the tensions between two seemingly opposing citizenships – Kingdom of Heaven and the World – so they can develop understanding of how these two worlds can work cohesively in a more harmonious and mutual manner. The next section will examine how this faith-civic integrative framework (Stoppa, 2015) focuses on two components – community orientation and civic responsibility – that frame civic education as an integral commitment for the Christian educator.

First, civic development is *community-oriented* in nature, and reflects humanity's need to belong with one another, based on the fundamental concept of *imago dei*, or understanding that human beings were made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27), and is key to understanding God's vision in the optimal development of

humans. Extending this distinct belief is the doctrine regarding the trinitarian nature of God's existence as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that constitutes three persons fully unified, yet distinct. Christian sociologist John Balswick and his colleagues (2005) argued that the social nature of this trinity – specifically the perfect communal relationship of the Godhead – embodies both uniqueness and relatedness and thus represents the ideal model for human development and relationships. Drawing from the works of various theologians (e.g., Anderson, 2010; Barth, 2015), a community-oriented perspective of *imago dei* emphasizes that each human being is made uniquely, but also intended to exist in full relational community with God and others. This Biblical perspective provides understandings about the inherent community-oriented nature of human beings that has implications for the teaching aspect of civic education, including promoting the common good (Acts 2:44-46), valuing diversity (Romans 12:3-13), and emphasizing community-oriented values (Colossians 3:12-17).

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Next, the integrative framework (Stoppa, 2015) emphasizes that civic responsibility is a major Biblical theme. Throughout the Old Testament, the Israelites struggled in both their relationship to God and to earthly rulers. In response to their unruliness, God provided laws to the people (The Ten Commandments) by which to live as citizens of a chosen nation (Exodus 20:1-17). Although the people strayed away from the law, God brought

prophets (e.g., Isaiah, Jeremiah) to call His people back into a rightful relationship with Him; while in the process, God constantly encouraged his people to restore the broken world based on a new model of reconciliation, justice, and peace (National Association of Evangelicals, 2004). In the New Testament, Christ arrived to announce the onset of God's Kingdom on Earth (Matthew 4:17) while ushering in a new covenant (Luke 22:20) that specifies the condition that Christians living under the new covenant with Jesus will have earned citizenship in the Kingdom of Heaven, with all of its privileges and responsibilities. However, as citizens under this new covenant, Christians, and the rest of the world, live in the "already, but not yet" stages, while they wait for Christ's return and fullness of the kingdom to be restored (Luke 22:20). Although the Christian's ultimate citizenship lies within the kingdom of God, contemporary Christians have an obligation to exercise their roles as citizens in their earthly communities as outward signs pointing the world to Christ and the coming kingdom. In other words, the Christian's role is not to withdraw from the world, but to help transform the world so that it may be reclaimed for Christ's purposes.

In turn, Christians are called to exercise *dual* citizenships by jointly adhering to God and His heavenly kingdom, while simultaneously obeying the authorities vested by God in our earthly communities. In unpacking this doctrine, Peter first defines authority in a civic sense as "emperor, as the supreme authority, or to the governors" (1 Peter 2:13). Next, Romans 13:1-7 indicates that because the "authorities that exist have been established by God," whose authority and power have been "created through him and for him," then it follows that Christians should submit to the civic leaders that God has instituted here on earth. However, these passages do not advocate for blind adherence to earthly authorities, since God has "supremacy" over everything, both in heaven and earth (Colossians 1:16-18; Proverbs 8:15-16). This doctrine of dual citizenship emphasizes the importance of Christians to serve as citizens in both their heavenly and earthly communities, which is aptly summed in Jesus' words to His followers, to "give to Caesar what is Caesar and to give to God what is God's" (Matthew 22:15-22).

In sum, this integrative framework (Stoppa, 2015) provides Biblical evidence to better understand how the Christian worldview must include a sense of civic responsibilities to not just their heavenly, but also their earthly communities. Stoppa contended that the Christian's role is focused on engagement with, rather than separation from the world, and thus it follows that they should be an active participant in fulfilling their obligations to serve and to create a better democracy.

## The Importance of Incorporating Moral Values in Civics Education

In providing civic learning to students, educators must determine whether civic values should be explicitly taught in the context of learning about the practices of democracy and democratic citizenship. This question is widely debated by civic education scholars, with differing perspectives based on whether to adopt a civics learning framework that explicitly integrates moral values (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006; Butts, 1998) in comparison with a values-free approach that does not factor in the teaching of moral values (Lickona, 1991). The implications of this dilemma are critical, given that contemporary moral values are historically rooted in Judeo-Christian tradition.

According to advocates of a value-neutral approach, teachers should simply focus on teaching the institutions and structures of government, on office holders and their responsibilities in governing, and on certain intellectual skills associated with effective democratic citizenship (e.g., participation, critical thinking, and decision-making, cf. Lickona, 1991). However, when questions inevitably arise about how members of a liberal society develop shared understanding in the principles of government and democratic institutions, this teaching approach tends to treat moral values as more of a matter of preference and opinion rather than absolutes or a "general law of nature," akin to Kant's view of morality (Kant, 1993, p. 187).

The decision to adopt one or the other of these two main approaches depends on how citizenship is defined, and to that effect, will determine the

priorities of civic education. Citizenship can be broadly defined to include a range of social, political, and psychological attitudes, values and behaviors (Perry & Katula 2001). A community-oriented perspective on citizenship (Perry & Katula, 2001) emphasizes cognitive skills, such as problem solving and a deeper awareness of social issues expressed through connections to the community. Based on this conception of citizenship, we argue that this perspective is more aligned with the moralist stance on civic education.

In *Theory of Justice*, noted political theorist John Rawls (1999) outlined a view of democratic values reflecting a focus of principled reconciliation of liberty and equality that is meant to apply to the basic structure of a well-ordered society. Rawls argued that democratic society must be predicated on certain moral imperatives, such as justice, freedom, and equality. For example, justice considered as the "first virtue of social institutions" is what must govern the conduct of persons in their relations to one another and thus defines the boundaries within which individuals and pluralistic communities may develop their aims and actions. Further, Rawls spoke of a *public sense of justice* that produces a well-ordered society in which everyone develops strong moral sentiments about the same principles of justice. In turn, this justice principle provides understanding of the equal liberties aspect of citizenship indicating that because "each person is to have equal rights," then "liberties are all required to be equal...since citizens of a just society are to have the same basic rights" (Rawls, 1999 p. 61). Applying this perspective, we then have an understanding how democratic societies can reach shared judgment about the justice or injustice of particular social practices, such as the widespread conviction among Americans that slavery is wrong.

In the spirit of Rawls' (1999) political theories of justice as a framework for understanding democratic foundations, various civic education scholars argue the necessity of establishing a moral basis in the context of civic learning to students (Bull, 2006; Butts, 1988). More specifically, Barry L. Bull (2006), a Professor Emeritus at Indiana University, argued that early political ideals including Locke's liberalism, Mill's

utilitarianism, and Kant's deontology, emphasize the necessity of moral values in the formation of democracies, and thus should be integrated into the teaching of civic ideals to students. Further, Bull argued that teaching civic education to students without connections to moral values is a baseless exercise because it will lack the "normative justifications for the civic ideals that they are taught" (Bull, 2006, p. 21). His concern was mounted in response to challenges from certain civic education scholars (Guttman & Thompson, 1998), who have argued that civic ideals should be taught independently from certain moral foundations. In this scenario of a civics education curriculum, absent of moral theories, students are taught about the civic ideals of their particular nation as a set of empirical facts, including other aspects related to what people believe as the political roles of government and the obligations of citizens to that government and to one another. The problem with this approach is that absent of moral authority, civic education is reduced to anthropological observations about the beliefs that individuals hold, and thus attempts to understand and address America's civic ideals, such as diversity and liberty, are relegated to deep and unresolved arguments (Bull, 2006).

Bull (2006) pointed to another principle from Rawls' (1999) political theories that addressed concerns about the importance of teaching the moral basis of civic ideals in order to prevent students from developing a "divided consciousness" in their attitudes towards the ideals themselves. In general, citizens must navigate through a diverse set of competing principles that make up their moral intuitions, and thus must develop some sort of consistency or equilibrium among their beliefs. Clearly, individuals have personal moralities that are shaped by exposure to a broad range of various areas: families, schools, religious institutions, and other intimate associations. Thus, it is important to teach that civic values and political principles have a moral nature so that students do not develop a divided understanding that these aspects are separate from their religious and moral upbringings.

In the context of civic education, civic ideals that have moral authority should be taught to prevent

raising issues to students' other moral commitments. Because of the increasing cultural and religious diversity among the students themselves, the integration of moral values in civic education prevents students from developing a divided consciousness in their moral commitments. In this case, the individuals' civic morality is wholly integrated with their personal and cultural morality (Bull, 2006). And to this end, this approach will help students develop commitments to the moral foundations of the civic ideals and thus the civic ideals themselves. For example, a historical example like the Civil War can be used to teach students to examine the principles of government and their rationales that may have emerged from the commitments and circumstances of various social groups. In the process, students can analyze the actions of governments and their citizens as flowing from general principles, which they can then reflect on, and perhaps evaluate, reinterpret, or reformulate on the basis of their and others' experience and their own private moralities.

Civic educators are confronted with the problems of deciding the extent, if any, that moral values can be integrated in the teaching of civic ideals. For example, can they effectively teach students about the civic ideals of their particular nation based simply on a set of empirical facts such as what people of this particular place at this particular time happen to believe about the political and social roles of government? The issue with this approach is that it can promote genuine normative claims that not all students can accept, especially based on the fact that they come from extremely diverse cultures and religions. A moral basis is naturally embedded in civic ideals and thus provides a necessary foundation to teaching civic education.

Although the moral basis for these civic virtues is shaped by a broad range of influences, we argue that students can and should formulate their own morally-based position on some of the most pressing social and political issues of our time. We now turn to one specific example in order to illustrate how Christian educators can apply biblical values to the political concept of "citizenship" and the politics of belonging in order to demonstrate how a civic issue can be viewed through a morally-based lens. In doing so, we



encourage Christian educators to apply a moral basis of civic education to a variety of civic issues, and model for their students how religious faith and/or personal values can help students merge their faith/morals with civic learning.

For Christian educators, one way to incorporate Biblical principles and Christian values in a civics lesson such as this one is to scaffold student learning regarding the current qualifications of citizenship. When teachers introduce the concept of “citizenship” in a civics unit and/or course in school, they could present a basic definition of a citizen as a person who belongs to a nation. To build on this, teachers could also encourage students to construct their own definition of what defines a “citizen” vs. a “non-citizen” in order to help students begin the process of understanding that citizenship is in and of itself a social construct, an identity created by lawmakers in a nation. After establishing a working definition of citizen, teachers could then introduce the two pathways to U.S. citizenship – birthright citizenship (*jus solis*) and naturalization. Under birthright citizenship, with few exceptions, individuals born on U.S. soil are automatically awarded U.S. citizenship status. Generally, teachers should provide just a few immigration requirements that will help them to engage in a thoughtful discussion concerning what they think about the current requirements (the number of requirements presented for discussion may vary by grade level, but introducing all of the requirements may prove too tedious and detract from the main point of the lesson). For example, teachers could select five requirements, such as potential citizens (1) must have entered the U.S. legally, (2) must be of good moral character, (3) must support the principles of American government, (4) must prove they can read/write and speak English (some exemptions do apply in this area), and (5) must show some basic knowledge of American history and government (For detailed naturalization requirements see the “Naturalization Eligibility Worksheet” developed by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2006) . After reviewing some of the requirements for naturalization, teachers should inform students that once the naturalization process is complete, immigrants are eligible to enjoy all the rights and privileges of citizenship such as voting,

working for a campaign, writing to elected officials, joining an interest group, and other activities that foster civic engagement and political activism. In this example of teaching the concept of a “citizen” and explaining some of the rights and privileges one has as a citizen of a nation, how can educators apply a moral basis of civic education to the study of citizenship?

Once current qualifications of U.S. citizenship are established, educators could challenge students to consider the possibility of expanding or modifying current qualifications by asking broader questions, such as “how do these current qualifications align with key American democratic principles of liberty, justice, and equality?” Rather than accepting current policies as set in stone and impervious to change, teachers should challenge their students to consider current policies and whether or not they could/should be changed, and if so, on what grounds? For example, teachers could pose this question to their students, “If one is not born on U.S. soil and thus ineligible for *jus solis* birthright citizenship, what should be the qualifications for becoming a naturalized citizen, and on what basis?” At this point, the shortcomings of employing a non-values based, strictly empirically based approach, becomes more evident, since the question is not, “Should we apply values to these civic concepts?” but, rather, “Which values will you apply to this concept?”

For Christian educators, there are two possible approaches to teaching the concept of citizenship, and more specifically, the question of who is deserving of citizenship, with several secular corollaries to the biblical principles outlined below that can be effectively deployed in a secular, public school environment. One approach that teachers could present in studying this concept is to apply a “national sovereignty” and/or “rule of law” perspective. For Christian educators, the connection to biblical principles can be found in Romans 13:1-5, as the Bible instructs Christians “to submit to governing authorities,” for “the authorities that exist have been established by God.” In the public-school setting, teachers can draw this biblical value into the discussion by explaining the American democratic value of “respecting the rule of law.” The value of “respecting the rule of law” clearly serves as a

moral basis for the qualification that requires that applicants must have entered the U.S. legally.

Upon establishing the fact that “respecting the rule of law” serves as a moral basis for qualifications for citizenship, teachers could challenge their students to consider whether the existing qualification is justifiable in its exclusion of people who do not enter the U.S. legally. Again, drawing from biblical principles, Genesis 1:26-27 clearly establishes the concept of *imago dei*, that every human being is made in the image of God. In Luke 10:25-37, Jesus instructs everyone to “love your neighbor as yourself,” without conditions or caveats. Taken together, these biblical principles should prompt educators to contemplate what “unconditional love” requires of us. What should “unconditional love” in the biblical sense applied to the context of citizenship eligibility requirements look like? In the public-school classroom, the “golden rule” (treat others as you would want to be treated) could be applied as the secular corollary to helping students bridge the gap between moral values and civic concepts such as citizenship. In prompting students to apply a moral value, such as “golden rule,” to the question of who deserves citizenship, students will be able to clearly identify which values prevail currently (respect for the rule of law), and how applying a completely different set of values (such as the “golden rule” or “unconditional love”) can lead to an entirely different outcome. The lesson is not about teaching students which moral basis is superior or inferior, but to demonstrate that even seemingly neutral civic ideals and legal requirements in our country are fundamentally based on a set of moral values. Historic changes in civil rights protections for racial/ethnic minorities, voter enfranchisement of women and minorities, the legalization of interracial and same-sex marriages, are just a few examples of how civic ideals do not remain static, and continue to change as American public opinion/values shifts over time.

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In sum, we have provided the rationale for using the moral basis model approach to teaching civics, and demonstrated what this looks like in practice using a case study example of teaching a lesson citizenship to students. In the next section we will present examples of how civic education that consists of various teaching approaches, interventions, and programs, based on an active research strand that has employed rigorous investigation methods, can help students to learn to become active and informed citizens.

## Research on Civic Education

Innovations in civic education are generally demonstrated by new teaching approaches, interventions, and programs. To better understand these programs, scientists have employed various types of evaluations, such as randomized field experimental and quasi-experimental designs, in order to test the extent to which students exposed to these programs have improved on various civic engagement measures, including self-efficacy, inclination to vote, and media use (Lin, 2014; Syvertsen et al., 2009). The most well-known programs that focus on civic

education include *Project Citizens*, *We the People*, and *Civitas*. These programs are freely provided by the Center for Civic Education, and can be delivered at any grade level and school context. In the elementary school context, *Kids Vote USA* (1988) is one of the oldest civic education programs that has been implemented in over 30 states. The program teaches children the importance of voting by combining the practice of voting with a school curriculum package that encourages students to read and discuss candidates, issues, and ballot initiatives, both in the classroom and at home. Simon and Merrill's study (1998) examined the positive effects of the *Kids Vote* using a quasi-experimental study that involved over 8,000 elementary school students and identified various benefits to the *Kids Vote* program, including higher news media use for campaign information and voting appreciation. In the secondary grades (middle- and high school), *Project Citizens* is a year-round program that provides supplemental lesson plans for existing high school government courses. Vontz et al. (2000) conducted a quasi-experimental study on the *Project Citizens* program based on a sample of 1,400 elementary school students. The study found that program enrollment was associated with significant positive effects on students' perceived skills of voting and participation in civic groups. Taking these findings together, it is evident that K-12 schools can provide a form of civic education that can help foster civic values among young children.

## Best Practices in Classroom Activities Fostering Civic Education

Here, we discuss how specifically Christian educators can incorporate practical, hands-on classroom activities that can promote civic education. An important feature in civic education is that it can be integrated across *all* grade levels and disciplines, including math and science, despite misconceptions that civic education is just limited to the subject of social studies. The following represents the four best practices in civic education: controversial issues discussion, political simulations, participation in school governance, and service-learning projects.

Controversial Issues Discussions refer to classroom discussions on socially relevant issues that spark significant disagreements, such as abortion and climate change. The value of this approach is more about helping students learn the importance of engaging in civil discourse, rather than merely determining who is right or wrong. In fact, students' perceptions of frequent, active classroom discussions of controversial issues are strongly linked with their civic knowledge and behavior, according to an international study that examined students enrolled in public and private schools across 38 countries (Lin, 2014).

Resources that the Christian Church and other organizations have used to facilitate discussions of controversial issues can be applied in the public school though with certain modifications. For example, "Talking Together as Christians About Tough Social Issues" is a curriculum guide that provides scaffolds and strategies for fostering discussion of controversial issues (Bloomquist & Duty, 1999). Although the curriculum is primarily Christian-based, the authors has designed the program for Christian congregations with the mindset of "engage(ing) those of diverse perspectives, classes, genders, ages, races, and cultures in the deliberation process" (p. 1). The curriculum guide provides comprehensive information on a range of topics, from establishing explicit ground rules to use of specific probing questions and providing reconciliatory strategies in order to promote peaceful closing of conversations. Most importantly, the curriculum guide provides procedural resources for the facilitator's role to engage in critical self-reflection to examine all their implicit biasness with opportunities to apply a Christian ethics of care framework in examining social issues (Wolterstorff, 2011). In this sense, the facilitator's role can be applied to the Christian educator who can not only feel more comfortable and less fearful with the idea of navigating through conflicting ideas, but also learn how to engage in these discussions within a context that promotes a strong community of care among their students in the public school classroom.

Political simulations can help students learn the procedural aspects of how democracy and governments operate. To learn the essential aspects of political simulations, students progress

from researching political issues and candidate positions, to engaging in speech making and then participating in a voting and election exercise. A teachable moment in this classroom activity is to allow students to evaluate the moral nature of certain candidates and political issues. For example, students can act as political candidates in charge of developing a campaign, with aid from a campaign team (composed of students), to earn majority support from the other students. One benefit of this classroom activity is that students are engaged with evaluating candidates' positions on various issues in order to see that they are consistently and frequently aligned with certain moral principles. In turn, this presents an opportunity for the teacher to encourage discussions with the students in order to examine the extent that moral values and ethics play in determining the most viable candidate. Political simulations can be designed to address current political and social issues that affect the Christian community based on the following two scenarios. In one scenario, teachers and students can simulate a city council meeting where students can propose and advocate for a specific community need advocated by a particular church and ministry. Students can embody various roles, such as the church representative, board of council members, and public attendees. In another scenario, students can act as political candidates in charge of developing a campaign, with aid from a campaign team (composed of students), in order to earn majority support from the other students. The importance of this classroom activity is that students are engaged with evaluating candidates' positions on various issues in order to determine if they are consistently and frequently aligned with general moral and civic values. In political simulations, students are not only granted opportunities to learn about specific community needs that are critical to the church, but also engage in the procedural functions of advocacy and law-making functions of the public service arena.

Participation in shared governance focuses on providing opportunities for students to engage in more decision-making on matters in the classroom, and more broadly, in their school life. Biblical perspectives suggest that students who have been perfected by the education through

which their teacher has led them can progress towards being more like the teacher in character and temper (Luke 6:40, "The student is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like their teacher"). By enabling students to participate in the classroom setting, students are being introduced to concepts of democracy that can aid them in future participation in the public process. In practice, educators are called to engage in self-reflection of classroom management theories in order to determine if these belief systems are congruent with a Biblical view of the child and of the role of teacher (Haveman, 2012). For example, strong assertive discipline approach to classroom management may provide constraints on student input that limit decision-making opportunities. However, a democratic approach to education engages students in building a strong classroom community by providing them opportunities to be involved in co-creating curriculum and participating in critical dialogue on issues that impact their lives (Collins et al., 2019).

Many students have good ideas on how to improve their schools, and they will act when given the opportunity to make change that is important to them. In the classroom, students can feel more empowered by taking on certain roles and duties, as well as helping the teacher to develop classroom rules. More broadly, students today can participate in shared governance in a variety of school contexts: student council, youth advisory boards, and department committees. In general, schools can offer opportunities for students to be involved in a student council to engage in various roles, such as plan school events (e.g. School Spirit Day), advocate for certain issues, and help raise funds for school activities (National Center for Learning and Civic Engagement, 2014). Key democratic skills are practiced in this opportunity, given that students are learning how to be organized, prioritize, work with one another, and navigate differing ideas and opinions. In sum, it is recommended that students engaged in shared governance of their school community, providing them with the opportunity to exercise key skills in civic engagement.

Community-based learning represents one of the key components of K-12 civic education, and generally encourages students to exercise practice

of service within their local communities (Carnegie Corporation & CIRCLE, 2003). More importantly, community-based learning (CBL) addresses key Christian principles pertaining to compassion, which encourages students to think broadly about serving the needy and disadvantaged in society, as Christians have been commanded by the Lord “to defend the rights of the poor and needy” (Proverbs 31:8-9).

Community-based learning is uniquely distinct from service-learning, or more general volunteering opportunities, from the perspective that teaching and learning strategies are designed around encouraging students to apply their knowledge and skills in order to develop viable solutions to real world, community needs (Mooney & Edwards, 2001). In high quality community-based learning initiatives, students have considerable voice in determining activities, and teachers facilitate knowledge and skill acquisition. This experiential learning tactic has been shown to influence civic identity formation and related values and attitudes by providing opportunities for students to tackle community problems (Billig et al., 2003). Academic coursework and programs that strongly focus on CBL have been shown to improve students’ academic performance, including enhanced subject matter understanding and critical thinking skills, based on an empirical study on over 200 different institutions (Astin & Sax, 1998).

More specifically, we recommend an assets-based model of CBL, developed by Kretzman and McKnight (1993), that critically addressed the problem of general volunteer activities, where student volunteers may potentially develop interpretations that may then preserve, or even spread, the belief that a group is vulnerable or powerless, especially when the service experience overlooks the resources of the local community or population (Peterson, 2009). Rather, the assets-based model focuses on providing opportunities for student and community participants to engage in asset-mapping as co-creators and co-learners, rather than understanding them as subjects in need of outside assistance. In practice, this asset-mapping typically complete a series of steps including identification of assets and canvassing, building a community profile and visual map of the community, creating and implementing an

action plan. Asset identification is completed through canvassing. One case study report comprehensively described the assets-based model of CBL utilized in a Sociology class (Garoutte & McCarthy-Gilmore, 2014). The study described the beginning process for students to engage in asset identification through the process of canvassing, where they toured neighborhoods, spoke with residents and community leaders, dialogued with class speakers, and examined materials from local businesses and organizations. In the final stages of this CBL learning experience, researchers described how students had to create a plan of actions so they could transform what they learned into a concrete and tangible future goal. In sum, CBL opportunities not only provide students with mentorship opportunities with their teachers, but also have the potential to build networks with leaders and activists working in various ministries and community organizations.

## Conclusion

This research provides a comprehensive understanding of how civic education can be enhanced through a Christian lens perspective, and can be summarized by these two main points. First, a strong Biblical connection naturally exists between the Christian worldview and civic responsibilities according to the integrative framework (Stoppa, 2015). Christians generally exercise dual citizenships – Kingdom of Heaven and Earth – that inform their role to give joint adherence to God and their earthly authorities. In turn, this perspective informs Christian teachers to encourage and promote students’ involvement in their community, given that the values of civic engagement run deep within Christian life and Biblical principles. Next, by employing a “moral basis model,” Christian educators can lead the charge in helping students understand that because civic values possess a moral nature, students should practice integrating their religious or moral upbringings in their civic learning.

In sum, civic education is a goal that educators from all fields and backgrounds are called to provide. Moreover, the principles and values of the Christian faith naturally overlap with the tenets of civic education. The same Christian ethos that affirms the *imago dei* and declares the

inherent and equal worth of each individual, can inspire the core values of the school community. By exercising responsible citizenship in the world, we also enhance our sense of duty more broadly to the kingdom of God.

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